CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

CD/PV.781
27 January 1998

ENGLISH

FINAL RECORD OF THE SEVEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-FIRST PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 27 January 1998, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. Norberg (Sweden)

GE.98-60322 (E)

The PRESIDENT: I declare open the 781st plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament.

I have on my list of speakers for today the representative of Bangladesh. I now invite the representative of Bangladesh, Ambassador Chowdhury, to take the floor.

Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh): Mr. President, the Bangladesh delegation extends to you warm felicitations. This is not only because you, the Ambassador of Sweden, a country with which Bangladesh has such close ties, have assumed our Chair. This is also because you commenced your stewardship by signalling your determination that after last year's "pause and reflection", the time for action has now surely come. Please rest assured of our fullest cooperation.

Tributes are also owed to your predecessor, Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke of Sri Lanka. As fellow South Asians my delegation shares a modicum of pride in his diligent perseverance. In a similar vein the continuing contributions of Under-Secretary-General Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky and his deputy, Mr. Abdelkader Bensmail, are worthy of praise.

The session has brought several newcomers in our midst. We accord them a very warm welcome. Fresh blood will doubtless add vigour to our deliberations.

Towards the end of last year Ambassador Agus Tarmidzi of Indonesia made an impassioned appeal for an enlightened approach. This is worth heeding.

The Bangladesh delegation is pleased that this year we have made a good start. In this context, I refer to South Africa's proposal for an ad hoc committee on nuclear disarmament, together with a suggested mandate. On Ambassador Selebi's part, it was yet another effort by him to cut the Gordian knot of an impasse. Those of us who have the experience of working closely with him admire his remarkable ability to light our paths just when we feel darkness descending.

There has been an outpouring of cascading support for his initiative. Significantly, these voices have cut across regions and groups. My delegation feels this is a happy sign. We believe that when an idea is worthwhile, there should be no a priori constraints to its acceptance. Such flexibility is essential if we are to achieve progress in this forum. Accommodation is the essence of understanding.

Bangladesh has always recognized the centrality of nuclear disarmament to this body's purposes against the matrix of the broad goal of general and complete disarmament.

With regard to nuclear disarmament, we note there are two extreme views. One, that it is best pursued bilaterally or plurilaterally with the aim of achieving higher levels of security with lower levels of weaponry.

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The other is that for the purpose of these negotiations, all heads together are better than either two or several.

The ideal solution lies somewhere in between. The intellectual challenge we confront is to identify where.

We have empathy for both positions.

True, there is the preponderant belief that nuclear deterrence has indeed worked. Principal protagonists now face the problem of reducing armaments within the framework of its theoretical parameters. The stakes are too high for them to experiment with alternatives.

Yet we know, while nuclear weapons exist, the possibilities of a breakdown of deterrence remains a perennial nightmare. Not only that, there will also be the urge to sophisticate the armoury, thereby increasing precision, thus enhancing the propensity to use.

Pitted against this, there are the desires of the "haves" to reduce the complexities of the negotiations by restricting participation principally of the "have-nots".

But all of us are aware that the nuclear genie is out of the bottle.

The number of those who have the capacity, and the capability to weaponize, exceed the number of those who actually possess such weapons.

To us, true disarmament would mean not only reductions in numbers, but also cuts in capability.

By making possession a criterion for participation in such key negotiations, we may actually encourage the acquisition of nuclear capability.

This would be destablizing. The consequences could be horrendous!

Our idea is not to replace other commendable ongoing processes, but to buttress them.

One prime law of political mathematics is that expanded participation equals widened support.

We agree with Ambassador Anne Anderson of Ireland that at some point the CD would have to be associated with nuclear disarmament negotiations.

Better sooner, perhaps, than later.

To both global and regional disarmament, Bangladesh's commitment is unambiguous and total. We view disarmament as an essential complement to our development priorities. Our war record in modern times consists mainly of either our struggle for independence or involvement under the United Nations flag. Our military potential is now pressed into the service of international

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peace-keeping operations, in which, as you are aware, we play a key role. Our disarmament agenda is also reflected in our domestic policies. Only last month, the Government successfully negotiated an accord to end the two-decade-old insurgency in the south-eastern Chittagong Hill Tracts. This historic accord, which has initiated, inter alia, decommissioning and surrender of weapons, is born of our resolve to fashion the proverbial ploughshare out of swords.

We have shown our readiness to be part of all stages of what we believe to be the inexorable objective of the total elimination of nuclear weapons. That is why we are party to the NPT, as well as signatory to the CTBT. After the CTBT, the logical next step for the CD would be to address nuclear disarmament. This is the most definitive of the signals to the CD emanating from the United Nations General Assembly.

The strength of the South African proposal is also its reticence on specifics. Its scope could be adjusted to contain the aspirations of all sides. A universal and legally binding multilateral agreement, committed to the objective of total elimination of nuclear weapons, could be taken up, as also the convention on the prohibition of the production of fissile material. The proposed ad hoc committee could draw the parameters of its mandate, including the mechanisms it would consider appropriate for conducting the actual negotiations. Furthermore, by addressing all aspects of nuclear disarmament under one committee, we are assured that integral elements of nuclear disarmament would be addressed in the context of the whole issue, and not to its exclusion. Under this broad cover, we are prepared to take any step as a first step, now that we have the CTBT behind us. Only then, we believe, can we enhance the international community's confidence in the CD's relevance to contemporary times, and its capacity to undertake useful substantive work.

Man has traversed a great distance between the neolithic and the nuclear ages. Ironically, this most civilized of creations has done more than any other species to try to obliterate others of its kind. The advent of the new millennium would be a good watershed point for change. Our intellects must be put to nobler use, constructive rather than destructive. We see a role in this for the CD. Just as Alfred, Lord Tennyson said of all human endeavours, we must try "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

The PRESIDENT: I thank the representative of Bangladesh for his statement and for the kind words addressed to the Chair. That concludes my list of speakers for today. Does any other delegation wish to take the floor?

If that is not the case, I should now like to take up for decision the requests from Mauritius and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to participate in the work of the Conference as observers. These requests are contained in document CD/WP.493, which is before you. May I take it that these requests are acceptable?

It was so decided.

The PRESIDENT: This concludes our business for today. Would any other delegation wish to take the floor?

If that is not the case, I should like to remind you that there will be no meeting of the Conference this coming Thursday, 29 January 1998, because of the Muslim holiday. Therefore, the next plenary meeting of the Conference will be held on Tuesday, 3 February 1998, at 10 a.m.

Before I adjourn this plenary meeting, I should like to inform you that I shall convene informal Presidential consultations in 15 minutes' time in this room, on agenda item 1, entitled "Cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament".

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.